

Benin Gardeners Tap Land and Water to Create a Small Business


YALI has “opened me to a way to dream. ... With YALI I’m living again, hopeful and ever determined.”

— Benin gardener Gabin Covo

When YALI Network member Gabin Covo moved from the village of Samionta to the city of Bohicon in Benin in 2012, “it was not possible to farm due to the lack of water resources,” he says. Then “one day, a friend informed me about a fountain flowing freely in another village about 24 kilometers from Bohicon. Excited, we rushed there to see whether it were possible to install a garden nearby. To our great surprise, we were granted a plot” by local officials.

The 33-year-old and two older friends started to turn the 1,200-square-meter plot into a thriving garden. They formed seedbeds, then bought two water pipes. They connected one end of a narrow pipe to the fountain faucet and joined the other end to a wider pipe. The combination reached their plot, and they installed taps to which they connected garden hoses to carry water directly to the plants. Finally, they buried the pipes in shallow soil to protect them from rust and breakage.

Once they could bring water to the seedbeds, they planted eggplant, known locally as gboma, cucumbers, pawpaw and peppers. “Our choice of products went to local vegetables [that are] easy to cultivate and easy to sell,” he says.

Gabin Covo stands  near the garden he and friends brought to life by piping water to it.

Overall, the garden materials and piping cost \$150, which they borrowed from friends. “A one-time investment,” Covo says. The new gardeners have been able to pay back half of the loan and expect to pay off the rest after their second harvest.

The pipes also have benefited plants outside the garden. “Within some weeks, the big bush near the fountain became green and flourishing, to the great surprise of the villagers,” he says.

About three months after starting the garden, Covo and his friends were selling their crops in Bohicon and making money. Villagers also come directly to the garden to buy their food. “That is how we are enjoying a good experience, by raising a small business in a region where water resources are limited,” he says.

The friends also learned that gardening for profit has its challenges. “The distance between the village and the city, for instance,” Govo notes, is an obstacle to transporting their product to market. But they knew that was a circumstance they needed to accept.

The success of the first garden plot provided a springboard to expansion. Town officials granted the

friends a second plot, doubling the size of the land they could cultivate. To diversify their product line, they are digging ponds so they can raise fish. They want to grow moringa oleifera, “a vegetable well-known for its virtues as food complement,” Covo notes.

“I don’t own land, but I know how to create riches with it,” Covo says. “For fellows that are considering agriculture as a career, to succeed you need to make sure you have water steadily. This is the most important resource.”

“You also need to study your environment to prevent any attack that will affect your production,” he says. He recommends studying the soil’s health to determine the best crops to plant and knowing which insects and diseases may be present in the soil or in the area to know how to protect crops from them.

Covo’s experience of starting small, reinvesting and understanding supply needs follows the advice of a business expansion expert who held a recent [Facebook chat](#) with the YALI Network. Madison Ayer of Honey Care Africa offers a step-by-step plan on how small growers can transform a subsistence farm into a commercial business.

Need-to-Knows for Start-Ups

U.S. entrepreneurs with a few years of successful growth answer the question, “**What do you wish you knew when you began your business?**”

A group of young African entrepreneurs 
Credit: AP Images

No One is Good at Everything

“There will always be tasks that you don’t have the skills to complete, and it’s okay to outsource those. It’s better to spend some money on an accountant than to try to learn payroll.” – Liam Martin, [Staff.com](#), an online staffing agency connecting employers and employees.

Organization Is Key

“As we become a larger company, we are realizing how chaotic it is to manage all the paperwork. I never like to delete stuff in case we need it in the future. Nevertheless, it became severely overwhelming and made us inefficient, so we decided to invest in ... a high-speed scanner, and interns to help us organize and digitize everything. It was worth the time and money.” – Derek Capo, [Next Step China](#), a Miami-based firm that offers affordable and flexible programs in China for students, professionals and government officials.

People Talk a Big Game

“You learn to filter through the “talkers” and the “doers” so you end up working with people who are exceptionally good at what they do.” – Danny Wong, [Blank Label](#), a Boston-based online men’s apparel company.

Write Down Reliable Processes

“You start up with so much energy, so many ideas and endless possibilities. You quickly maneuver and start to grow.... However, nobody told me how incredibly important it is to implement reliable and repeatable processes. You should write everything down and take note when something goes well.” – Arjun Arora, [ReTargeter](#), a display advertising platform specializing in audience targeting and retargeting.

The Vision Will Change

“My co-founder and I started with a very strong, clear vision of what we wanted our business to become. That vision shifted over time as new opportunities arose.... Initially, I resisted changing course because I felt like we were giving up on our vision. But eventually, I realized we were creating a better, much bigger business than we originally imagined.” – Martina Welke, [Zealyst](#), a Seattle-based networking service that hosts customized events and facilitates connections

Lead From Love

“Once I discovered how to lead from a place of love and gratitude, the landscape of (my company) changed. We started attracting a higher caliber of clientele, our quality improved, our processes improved and overall our company was infused with more joy.” — [Corey Blake](#), [Round Table Companies](#), a business consultancy in Evanston, Illinois.

Work Smart, Not Hard

“In the beginning, I thought I was being effective by simply working 80 hours a week. That couldn’t be further from the truth. The adept startup owner should instead focus on ways to get things done effectively in a shorter period of time.” — [Andrew Schrage](#), [Money Crashers Personal Finance](#), a Chicago-based online site that teaches individuals about credit and debt, investing, education, real estate, insurance, spending, and more.

Clients Don’t Always Pay on Time

“If you work with clients, it’s not a question of if they will pay late, but a question of when. Create a cash buffer as soon as humanly possible so you’re not left scrambling when a check comes late [payment is behind schedule] or gets lost in the mail [disappears in the post].” – [Allie Siarto](#), [Fare Oak](#), a Michigan-based online women’s fashion store.

People Are Complex Creatures

“The bulk of your time with an early startup is focused on building your team and supporting them to be great. That means you are part recruiter, part coach, part psychiatrist and part referee. But if you love helping people be great, it’s an awesome experience.” – [Eric Koester](#), Data Collateral, Inc., a Washington-based business consultancy.

Adapted from an article published online by The Young Entrepreneur Council (YEC), an invite-only organization comprised of promising young entrepreneurs. In partnership with Citi, [YEC](#) recently launched StartupCollective, a free virtual mentorship program that helps millions of entrepreneurs start and grow businesses.

Nigerian Entrepreneur Makes Shoes, One Pair at a Time

“Follow your dreams with courage, imagination and the ability to attract and work with the best minds.”


Credit: Niyi Omodara



Niyi Omodara, a young entrepreneur and member of the YALI Network, is the founder, designer and principal craftsman of Extra Valuable Apparel (EVA), a footwear company in Akure, Nigeria. He is a self-taught craftsman who started making slippers for his family in the early 1990s. Omodara is now producing “bespoke” shoes, customized for a client and made to order. His vision for EVA is to “manufacture world-class leather products through superior designs and quality materials.”

Could you describe your business to the YALI Network?

Omodara: EVA shoes are distinct because they are comfy, trendy and neater than all other Nigerian handmade shoes. I both design and create shoes for individual customers. Our products are sold largely by word-of-mouth, one customer to the next, through social media and wherever I can find customers. Each month we produce in the range of 35-50 pairs of customized shoes. That comes to about 450-480 pairs per year.

EVA produces more than 450 pairs of  custom-made shoes per year in Akure, Nigeria.

Credit: Niyi Omodara

How many people do you employ?

Omodara: Presently, I have two staff members and two trainees. One person assists me in shoe production alongside the trainees, while the second staff person works mainly on the branding, marketing and delivery of orders to our customers.

We are working hard to get more motivated [employees] in the production section. Finding skilled

and dedicated workers is hard, but we are optimistic.

What are your goals for this business?

Omodara: I'm constantly updating my business plan, but these are my overall goals:

1. To become Nigeria's hallmark for locally made products, especially in the leather manufacturing industry. I hope EVA can achieve this with an individualistic approach to customer satisfaction and service and by using the highest-quality materials.
2. To be a global player in shoe manufacturing from Africa by the year 2035. To achieve that, it becomes more obvious by the day that we will have to partner with international shoe-manufacturing factories to scale up production significantly. At that level, my role will largely be design, quality assurance, general supervision and marketing.
3. To continuously attract, train and retain the best minds and hands in order to fulfill the earlier mentioned goals.

One of the shoe designs available from 

EVA

Credit: Niyi Omodara

What advice do you give to others hoping to start a small business?

Omodara: Follow your dreams with courage, imagination and the ability to attract and work with the best minds. Focus intently on your goals. Loyalty, commitment and passion for the job are critical virtues, technical skills apart.

Are there any special obstacles for entrepreneurs and small-business persons in Nigeria?

Omodara: Yes, there are plenty of them:

- 1) The lack of a consistent, reliable energy supply is a big one in Nigeria. I generate my own power to run the factory half of the time. That required an initial investment of almost \$1,000, and about \$100 per month to maintain gasoline and service.
- 2) Access to investment capital is difficult when interest rates on bank loans run up to double figures. I started in 2011 with about \$105 in capital that I drew from savings.
- 3) Numbers of skilled workers are insufficient due to a general preference among young people for white-collar jobs rather than positions requiring skilled labour. The lack of skilled workers becomes a barrier to increased production for EVA.

Please briefly describe EVA's supply chain. Are raw materials locally sourced or imported?

Omodara: We buy all our raw materials in Nigeria. On the sales end, customers buy directly from us. We have contacted some of the biggest online stores in Nigeria to discuss making EVA products available, but no reply yet.

Are you a young entrepreneur? Share your experiences with the YALI Network on [Facebook](#) or [Twitter](#).

During the month of November, the YALI Network will focus on the topic of entrepreneurship, in recognition of the [Global Entrepreneurship Summit](#) to be held in Morocco November 19–21.

Is Entrepreneurship for You?

Starting your own business can be an exciting and rewarding experience. It can offer numerous advantages, such as being your own boss, setting your own schedule and making a living doing something you enjoy. But becoming a successful entrepreneur requires thorough planning, creativity and hard work.

Credit: Shutterstock



Consider whether you have the following characteristics and skills commonly associated with successful entrepreneurs:

- 1. Comfortable with taking risks:** Being your own boss also means you're the one making tough decisions. Entrepreneurship involves uncertainty. Do you avoid uncertainty in life at all costs? If yes, then entrepreneurship may not be the best fit for you. If you enjoy the thrill of taking calculated risks, read on.
- 2. Independent:** Entrepreneurs must make a lot of decisions on their own. If you find you can trust your instincts — and you're not afraid of rejection every now and then — you could be on your way to being an entrepreneur.
- 3. Persuasive:** You may have the greatest idea in the world, but if you cannot persuade customers, employees, and potential lenders or partners, you may find entrepreneurship to be challenging. If you enjoy public speaking, engage new people with ease and find you make compelling arguments grounded in facts, it's likely you're poised to make your idea succeed.
- 4. Able to negotiate:** As a small-business owner, you will need to negotiate everything from leases to contract terms to prices. Polished negotiation skills will help you save money and keep your business running smoothly.
- 5. Creative:** Are you able to think of new ideas? Can you imagine new ways to solve problems? Entrepreneurs must be able to think creatively. If you have insights on how to take advantage of new opportunities, entrepreneurship may be a good fit.

6. Support from others: Before you start a business, it's important to have a strong support system in place. You'll be forced to make many important decisions, especially in the first months of opening your business. If you do not have a support network of people to help you, consider finding a business mentor — someone who is experienced, successful, and willing to provide advice and guidance.

Adapted from an article published on the [U.S. Small Business Administration](#) website.
